United States Court of Appeals

for the Second Circuit

APPELLANT'S BRIEF

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United States Court of Appeals

For the Second Circuit.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Appellee,

-against-

OSMUNDO RODRIGUEZ,

Defendant-Appellant.

On Appeal From The United States District Court
For The Eastern District Of New York

APPELLANT'S BRIEF

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UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE SECOND CIRCUIT

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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Appellee,

-against-

Docket No. 74-1338

OSMUNDO RODRIGUEZ,

Defendant-Appellant.

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BRIEF ON BEHALF OF APPELLANT

STATEMENT PURSUANT TO RULE 28(c)

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

The appellant, Osmundo Rodriguez, appeals from a judgment of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York (NEAHER, D.J.) rendered after a jury trial on May 14, 1974, convicting him of two (2) counts of distributing narcotics and one (1) count od conspiracy. He was sentenced to two (2) years of imprisonment on each count, the sentences to be concurrent. In addition, a special parole term of five (5) years.

This action was tried from February 19, 1974, to February 25, 1974, and a notice of appeal was filed on or about May 29, 1974. Appellant is free on bail pending this appeal.

STATUTES INVOLVED

18 U.S.C. Section 2 — Principals

(a) Whosever commits an offense against the United States or aids, abets, counsels, commands, induces or procures its commission, is punishable as a principal.

(b) Whoever willfully causes an act to be done which if directly performed by him or another would be an offense against the United States, is punishable as a principal.

18 U.S.C. Section 371 — Conspiracy to Commit an Offense or to Defraud the United States

If two or more persons conspire either to commit any offense against the United States, or to defraud the United States, or any agency thereof in any manner or for any purpose, and one or more of such persons do any act to effect the object of the conspiracy, each shall be fined not more than $10,000 or imprisoned not more than five years or both.

21 U.S.C. Section 841 — Prohibited Acts A-Unlawful Acts

(a) Except as authorized by this subchapter, it shall be unlawful for any person knowingly or intentionally --

(1) to manufacturer, distribute, or dispense or possess with intent to manufacture, distribute or dispense a controlled substance.

18 U.S.C. Section 3501(a)

(a) In any criminal prosecution brought by the United States or by the District of Columbia, a confession, as defined in subsection (e) hereof, shall be admissible in evidence if it is voluntarily given. Before such confession is received in evidence, the trial judge shall, out of the presence of the jury, determine any issue as to voluntariness. If the trial judge determines that the confession was voluntarily made it shall be submitted in evidence.

FACTS

This case involved a three count indictment which essentially charged the appellant with distributing approximately six grams of cocaine on June 21, 1972 and sixty grams on June 27, 1972. The third count of the indictment charged a conspiracy from the period beginning June 20, 1972 and concluding June 28, 1972. The Government's evidence in chief may be summarized as follows: On June 21, 1972, Federal Narcotic Agents Abbott and Coughlan when to 265 Hawthorne Street, Brooklyn, New York, in an effort to purchase one-eighth (1/8) of a kilogram of cocaine from a John Osborne* who, according to evidence adduced at trial, was a well known trafficker in narcotics. The agents were known to Osborne as Ed and Mouse.

Osborne contended he did not have any cocaine in his possession at that time but would contact an associate to see if he could make delivery. According to Osborne, with Agents Abbott and Coughlan within the apartment, he telephoned the appellant and informed him that he had two customers "... who were willing to pay $2200 for an eighth and can he deliver it to me? He said he would come over later". (R.196)**

---

* John Osborne was jointly indicted with appellant. His case was severed before the trial commenced and he testified as a Government witness.

** Numerals preceded by "R" reflect the page numbers of the Trial Record and those preceded by "A" indicate the appellant's Appendix on Appeal.

Approximately one hour later the agents, who had left Osborne's apartment, returned and appllant Rodriguez arrived soon thereafter. While the agents remained in the living room of the apartment Osborne and Rodriguez went into the kitchen. Upon emerging from the kitchen Osborne gave the agents a quarter of an ounce of cocaine wrapped in aluminum foil as a sample. The agents were then introduced to Rodriguez by Osborne as "Ray" (R.306-336).

According to Osborne the agents inquired of appellant if the eighth would be the same as the sample. Appellant purportedly left and said he would return with the eighth within 45 minutes. The agents paid $100 to Osborne for the quarter of an ounce of cocaine. According to the testimony appellant did not return on that date and the agents departed. The agents thereafter contacted Osborne who informed them that appellant had indeed arrived with the eighth on June 23, 1972, soon after they had departed. This was June 27, 1972, the subject of Count II of the indictment. At approximately 7:00 P.M. on June 27, 1972 Osborne, as had been pre-arranged with Ed and Mouse (Agents Abbott and Coughlan), sold them two ounces of cocaine for $1100. Following this transaction the agents left the apartment with Osborne with the understanding they would return later that evening to purchase another two ounces for an additional $1100. There was testimony that

Osborne drove from the area of his domicile in a Pontiac automobile registered to appellant Rodriquez. He proceeded to Rodriguez' home at 804 Rogers Avenue, a short distance from the Osborne apartment. Osborne returned to his apartment by bus. The agents soon re-appeared and the three of them awaited appellant's arrival. After a one-and-a-half hour wait the agents decided to leave and as they reached the lobby of Osborne's apartment building Rodriguez arrived.

The four of them returned to Osborne's apartment. Osborne and appellant again entered the kitchen while the agents remained in the living room. Upon emerging from the kitchen Osborne gave the agents two ounces of cocaine in return for $1100. According to the agents and Osborne they inquired that if the cocaine was no good -- "who would be responsible"? Osborne accepted responsibility for the quality of the narcotic. Osborne, as aforesaid, testified at trial for the Government. Suffice it to say that Agents Abbott and Coughlan and Osborne's testimony are not at such serious variance that they should be individually summarized.

On July 24, 1972 appellant was arrested in proximity of his residence at 1:25 P.M. and returned to his apartment. He was given the Miranda warnings and then brought to 90 Church Street, Manhattan, the office of the Bureau of Dangerous Drugs, where the Miranda warnings were again given. At approximately 4:20 P.M. he was questioned by Assistant

United States Attorney Sheerin at the U.S. Courthouse at Cadman Plaza, Brooklyn, in the presence of Agent Coughlan.

A pre-trial motion for discovery was timely made by trial counsel for appellant. However, not until the very inception of the trial did the Government announce that it intended to utilize an incriminatory statement attributed to appellant by Agent Coughlan who was physically present when Assistant United States Attorney Sheerin questioned Rodriguez in his office. This information was not contained in the Government's Bill of Particulars. It is an irrefutable fact that Agent Coughlan reduced to writing Rodriguez's statement taken at the office of the United States Attorney (Sheerin).

Notwithstanding,this most prejudicial evidence was ultimately received at trial contrary to Rule 16(a) of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure.

POINT I

APPELLANT WAS DENIED A FAIR TRIAL WHEN THE COURT FAILED TO RULE ON THE VOLUNTARINESS OF INCRIMINATING STATEMENTS ATTRIBUTED TO HIM. THE ERROR WAS COMPOUNDED WHEN THE COURT FAILED TO EXCLUDE THE JURY DURING THIS VITAL AND CRUCIAL PROCEEDING WHICH WAS IN CONTRAVENTION OF 18 U.S.C. SECTION 3501(a).

Agent Coughlan testified that he was present when Assistant United States Attorney Sheerin questioned appellant on the date of his arrest and recorded incriminating statements allegedly made by him (R.334,335; 351-354).

Prior to Agent Coughlan testifying on this specific issue appellant's counsel sought and was granted by the court a voir dire for a ruling as to whether Rodriguez's statements were voluntary and whether the Miranda warnings were properly administered by the Assistant United States Attorney in attendance (R.331-333)

The voir dire was conducted in the presence of the jury. We claim: (1) that the defendant was denied a fair trial by the court's action and procedure; (2) we also claim as prejudicial error the failure of the court to determine in the first instance the voluntariness of the statements by appellant, and (3) that the foregoing constitutes a direct violation of 18 U.S.C. Section 3501(a).

Insofar as is pertinent, 18 U.S.C. Section 3501(a), reads as follows:

"(a) In any criminal prosecution brought by the United States or by the District of Columbia, a confession, as defined in subsection (e) hereof, shall be admissible in evidence if it is voluntarily given. Before such confession is received in evidence, the trial judge shall, out of the presence of the jury, determine any issue as to voluntariness. If the trial judge determines that the confession was voluntarily made it shall be submitted in evidence.

(Emphasis supplied)

Jackson v. Denno, 378 U.S. 368 (1964).

The Supreme Court decided simultaneous with Jackson, supra, the case of State v. Owen, 94 Ariz. 404 (1963) vacated 378 U.S. 574 (1964). In that case the court, as here, conducted a voluntariness hearing in the presence of the jury. This was held reversible error.

In Lopez v. State, (Texas Crim) 366 S.W.2d 587, vacated 378 US 567 (1964) a murder suspect's confession was introduced, and the issue of its voluntariness was submitted to the jury as was in the case at bar. Nevertheless, the court vacated the State judgment occasioned by the fact that the court in the first instance made no independent finding as occurred in the instant case.

Accord -- Harris v. State, 370 S.W.2d 886 (1963) vacated 378 U.S. 572 (1964); Muschette v. United States, 322 F.2d 989 (1963); Lego v. Twomey, 404 U.S. 477 (1972).

It is abundantly clear that the defect manifested here was in violation of 18 U.S.C. Section 3501(a). As was stated

by the court in Lego v. Twomey, 404 U.S. at p. 489:

> "To reiterate what we said in Jackson when a confession challenged as involuntary is sought to be used against a criminal defendant at his trial, he is entitled to a reliable and clear-cut determination that the confession was in fact voluntarily rendered *** by the trial judge before it is submitted to the jury, Section 3501(a), supra."

Agent Coughlan ascribed a total admission of guilt to appellant. Such being the case the statutory and Constitutional error evidenced here cannot be deemed of a harmless character. Indeed, the Coughlan testimony had originally been reduced to writing and as such should have been produced before trial (A6-A36). Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure, Rule 16(a). Instead, it was not produced until the eve of trial precluding any effective attempt at suppressing this testimony pre-trial. The meager attempt at a voir dire style hearing during trial was replete with error of a Constitutional magnitude. This error should not be construed harmless for it was caused by the Government's failure to do their homework before trial and make aware to the defense that this highly volatile evidence existed and precluded meaningful preparation by defense counsel at trial (A37-A43). Cf. United States v. Salazar, 485 F.2d 1272 at pp. 1278-79 (2d Cir. 1973); United States v. Feinberg, 15 Cr.L. 2031 (1974).

POINT II

THE OMISSION OF THE GOVERNMENT TO CALL AS A WITNESS AN ASSISTANT UNITED STATES ATTORNEY WHO HAD QUESTIONED APPELLANT ON THE DATE OF HIS ARREST AND INSTEAD CALLED AS A GOVERNMENT WITNESS AN AGENT WHO TESTIFIED THAT HE HAD BEEN PRESENT AND OVERHEARD APPELLANT RENDER INCRIMINATORY STATEMENTS CONSTITUTES REVERSIBLE ERROR BECAUSE IT WAS AVERRED TO THE JURY, IN THE GOVERNMENT'S OPENING STATEMENT, THAT THE DIRECT EVIDENCE OF THE ASSISTANT UNITED STATES ATTORNEY WAS AVAILABLE TO THE GOVERNMENT.

On July 24, 1972, at about 1:25 P.M. the appellant was arrested at his home, 804 Rogers Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y., by Agent Edward Coughlan and Lynn Wheeler. According to Agent Coughlan, he administered the Miranda warnings at that time (R.327).

Appellant was then brought in custody to 90 Church Street, New York, N.Y., for processing and where Agent Coughlan again administered the Miranda warnings. At this juncture, according to Agent Coughlan, appellant made one brief statement that involved a man named Tacajo as the supplier of cocaine (R.328, 329, 332).

At approximately 4:20 P.M., appellant, still in custody, arrived with the agents at the United States Attorney's office. Appellant was given the Miranda warnings by Assistant United States Attorney Sheerin. Incriminating admissions of guilt were obtained at this time (R.329-30). The Miranda warnings at that juncture were in the form of a writing

given to appellant and entitled "BND For 14-a".

The trial prosecutor in his opening statement to the jury stated in part:

> "*** the Government will call one other witness. At this time, ladies and gentlemen, I will not reveal his name to you, but in substance his testimony will go to Osmondo Rodriguez supplying John Osborne with the cocaine which was distributed to the undercover agents. Yes, this witness will testify as to the direct participation of Osmondo Rodriguez and these narcotic transactions." (R.21).

A perusal of the record clearly demonstrated that the unidentified individual alluded to within the prosecutor's opening statement was Assistant United States Attorney Sheerin. Instead, the Government produced Agent Coughlan who testified to what allegedly transpired between the Assistant United States Attorney and Appellant Rodriguez.

Agent Coughlan testified that he overheard appellant admit to Assistant United States Attorney Sheerin that he had used cocaine for about a year; that he had brought "a quarter of a piece" of cocaine to Agent Abbott and himself on June 22, 1972, at Osborne's apartment; that Rodriguez also admitted to bringing the second half of an eighth of cocaine on the evening of June 27, 1972, to Osborne's apartment; and finally, that appellant again admitted that his cocaine connection was one Tacajo (R.334,335;351,352)(A38-A42).

The gist of appellant's claim of error in this regard is that the Government failed in its mandatory obligation to

call Assistant United States Attorney Sheerin as a witness after the Government assured the jury his direct evidence would be produced. Manifestly, Agent Coughlin's testimony was hearsay and clearly inadmissible as a basic rule of evidentiary law. Furthermore, it tended to subvert the Sixth Amendment right to confrontation within the contemplation of Douglas v. Alabama, 380 U.S. 415 (1965).

Appellant asserts that the right to be confronted by Assistant United States Attorney Sheerin is basically a trial right that he never waived. The absolute right to cross-examine Sheerin and that the jury should have the benefit of observing Sheerin's demeanor and the opportunity to assess his credibility instead of that of Agent Coughlan's was irretrievably lost to appellant. Certainly, Agent Coughlan was in no position to speak for Sheerin on the issue of voluntariness. Neither could Coughlan speak for Sheerin as to why he made the appellant read the Miranda warnings and why he chose to interrogate him in the first instance. Obviously this baroque approach drastically delimited appellant to the meager issue as to whether Agent Coughlan accurately overheard the questioning of appellant by Sheerin.

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that the record is utterly barren of any valid governmental reason for using Agent Coughlan's hearsay evidence as opposed to Sheerin's direct evidence consistent with the prosecutor's

opening statement. The "Best Evidence Rule" has, of course, been done severe violence and the appellant denied substantial justice.

POINT III

THE GOVERNMENT PROSECUTOR'S ARGUMENT TO THE JURY TO THE EFFECT THAT IN ORDER TO ACQUIT THE APPELLANT THE JURY WOULD HAVE TO BRAND THE GOVERNMENT WITNESSES AS PERJURERS CONSTITUTES REVERSIBLE ERROR.

The trial prosecutor stated to the jury with unusual force:

> "Well, if you believe Agent Coughlan lied, if you believe Agent Abbott lied, if you believe Agent Wheeler lied, if you believe John Osborne lied, then I say to you now ladies and gentlemen --
>
> MR. HANDMAN: Objection, Your Honor.
>
> MR. PASCARELLA: (continuing) -- Acquit the defendant"(R.425) (A44).

The prosecutor's argument was patently improper. It is not a required sine qua non, as the prosecutor asserted, that a trial jury in a criminal case find that Government witnesses have lied before he is entitled to an acquittal. The prosecutor's reckless statement rendered nugatory the concept and teaching that all a jury need find is a reasonable doubt as to the accused's guilt. The error was further intensified by the fact that the erudite trial court omitted to

render prompt and curative instructions to the jury. Instead, the jury was permitted to accept the prosecutor's misstatement of the law as a valid truth. In a case as the one at bar, where the appellant did not testify and the evidence was not of a lethal character, the appellant is entitled to a new trial free of such inflammatory trial tactics. The Court's instruction on reasonable doubt buried deep within the main charge after many hours of such improper comment cannot cause such a grave error to dissipate as harmless.

Indeed, in a case as the one at bar which was of short duration, where the prosecutor's summation was delivered the same day, the taking of evidence concluded and the defense summation presented, the impropriety assumes greater significance. Particularly where as here the proof in this case was certainly not clear and convincing. See, A.B.A. Project on Standards for Criminal Justice, Standards Relating to the Prosecution Function and the Defense Function, 127 (1971).

Judge Kaufman's caveat in United States v. White, 486 F.2d 204 (1973) at p. 206, f.n. 4, obviously holds no meaning to the trial prosecutor in this case. Severer sanctions are merited than the mere censure that occurred in the White case. This would seem to be the only course left to finally correcting such prosecutorial mischief.

CONCLUSION

THE JUDGMENT HEREIN APPEALED FROM SHOULD BE REVERSED AND THE INDICTMENT DISMISSED.

Respectfully submitted,

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STATE OF NEW YORK)
: SS:
COUNTY OF RICHMOND)

ROBERT BAILEY, being duly sworn, deposes and says, that deponent is not a party to the action, is over 18 years of age and resides at 286 Richmond Avenue, Staten Island, N.Y. 10302. That on the 12 day of July, 1974 deponent served the within Brief upon U.S. Attorneys

attorney(s) for Appellee

in this action, at 225 Cadman Plaza East Brooklyn, N.Y.

the address designated by said attorney(s) for that purpose by depositing 3 true copies of same enclosed in a postpaid properly addressed wrapper, in an official depository under the exclusive care and custody of the United States post office department within the State of New York.

ROBERT BAILEY

Sworn to before me, this
12 day of July, 1974

William Bailey

WILLIAM BAILEY
Notary Public, State of New York
No. 43-0132945
Qualified in Richmond County
Commission Expires March 30, 1976